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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND USS PELELIU BID FAREWELL TO CENTRAL VIETNAM

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**Summary**

**¶1.** (U) Summary: Ambassador Marine traveled to Danang on July 24-25 to attend closing activities related to the USS Peleliu's ten-day Pacific Partnership humanitarian mission to Vietnam. On the same visit, the Ambassador paid farewell calls on Tran Van Minh, Chairman of the Danang City People's Committee, and Catholic Bishop Joseph Chau Ngoc Tri. He also visited a dioxin/Agent Orange remediation site near Danang airport, held a press roundtable for Danang media, and presided over a JPAC Repatriation Ceremony during which three sets of remains believed to be Americans killed during the Vietnam conflict were transferred to U.S. custody. End summary.

**USS Peleliu - Pacific Partnership A Success**

**¶2.** (U) The USS Peleliu, a naval vessel on a four month Pacific Partnership mission to Southeast Asia and Oceania, arrived in Danang on July 15, 2007, for a ten-day humanitarian operation. Peleliu's crew of military personnel, NGO staffers and nationals of seven partner nations (Japan, Australia, Singapore, India, Malaysia, Canada and the Republic of Korea) conducted a variety of medical, dental and engineering operations in cooperation with the Vietnamese Ministries of Health (MOH) and Defense (MOD). Three civilian Vietnamese doctors also joined the Peleliu's crew at Danang and will participate in the remainder of the Pacific Partnership mission. The humanitarian mission was an overwhelming success and an important milestone for U.S.-Vietnam military cooperation.

**¶3.** (U) Ambassador Marine visited one of many mission sites, a medical and dental clinic run out of a local school. After meeting its target of one thousand medical and dental exams over four days, the clinic ran out of dental patients on the last day and had to request permission from local authorities to examine additional patients from a nearby primary school.

**¶4.** (SBU) The closing reception onboard the Peleliu was well attended by officials from the MOH, MOD and the Danang People's Committee. People's Committee Vice Chairman Van Huu Chien and his delegation were impressed with the tour given by ship's commanding officer, and eagerly asked questions about the ship's medical facilities and capabilities.

**Danang - City on the Move**

**¶5.** (U) During his farewell call on the Danang People's Committee, the Ambassador noted Danang's impressive economic growth over the last few years, as demonstrated by its current ranking as the second most competitive province nationwide in the 2006 Vietnam Provincial Competitiveness Index. The Ambassador cited the uptick in visits to Danang by himself and

the Consul General as evidence of the importance Mission Vietnam places on maintaining a visible presence in Danang and affirmed Mission Vietnam's desire to increase the level of USG activity in Central Vietnam in general.

¶6. (U) People's Committee Chairman Tran Van Minh thanked the Ambassador for his efforts to improve ties between the U.S. and Central Vietnam and expressed his desire to expand exchanges between U.S. and Danang youth, especially through U.S. educational exchange opportunities.

¶7. (U) Chairman Minh also commented positively on the Ambassador's visit to a dioxin cleanup site at Danang airport earlier the same day (see paras 13 and 14), and pressed for continued USG attention to the Agent Orange issue. Finally, Minh sought the Ambassador's advice on how best to ensure that the East-West Economic Corridor through Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, which terminates at Danang seaport, reaches its full potential.

Bishop of Danang notes Positive Trends, Ongoing Issues

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¶8. (U) At Ambassador Marine's first-ever meeting with Danang Bishop Joseph Chau Ngoc Tri, he began by expressing common interest in supporting religious freedom issues in Vietnam, affirming that USG interest has not been diminished by Vietnam's removal from the list of countries of particular concern (CPC) last year, and noting our continued willingness to follow up with the GVN on cases as they arise. Bishop Tri expressed a desire to increase exchanges with U.S. Catholics and noted that the Vietnam Bishops' Council plans to invite the U.S. Conference of Bishops to return to Vietnam next year.

¶9. (U) Bishop Tri presented a generally positive picture of his diocese's relationship with the government, noting that conditions for the Church's followers in Danang had improved significantly over the past few years. As evidence of the improving relationship between the Church and GVN, Bishop Tri

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cited the government's recent commitment to provide the diocese with land near Danang's riverfront to construct administrative offices, partially compensating the diocese for the land it lost after 1975. The diocese's current administrative offices have been borrowed from a local parish since 1985.

¶10. (U) Despite overall positive trends, Bishop Tri did note several areas of concern. He said establishing parishes in certain remote areas of the diocese has been "difficult" because of complications and delays created by local authorities. He also said the Church was displeased with news reports quoting President Nguyen Minh Triet as saying the Vatican and the Vietnam Bishops' Council supported GVN's handling of the trial of Father Nguyen Van Ly. Bishop Tri confirmed reports in the press that the Bishop of Nha Trang, who is also the Chairman of the Vietnam Bishops' Council, wrote President Triet to object to the way his comments were portrayed in the media. Finally, the bishop expressed frustration over the diocese's inability to train adequate numbers of priests and nuns, but attributed that problem to Danang's relatively small proportion of religious people, rather than problems with local authorities.

¶11. (SBU) When the Ambassador offered to raise the Bishop's concerns with the Danang People's Committee, Bishop Tri stated that he had not yet discussed the issue with the local government and preferred to talk to them first. The Ambassador encouraged Bishop Tri to approach the local government as soon as possible, noting GVN's improved responsiveness to religious issues over the past year.

U.S. Funds Dioxin Remediation Planning in Danang

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¶12. (U) Ambassador Marine toured the Danang Airport, which is the first Agent Orange/dioxin hotspot to receive USG technical assistance, accompanied by officials from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) Office 33 and MOD.

The USG has provided approximately USD 2 million since 2002 to build the capacity of the GVN in dioxin soil analysis and remediation planning at the Danang Airport. Since last year, the USG, together with the GVN and the Ford Foundation, have supported an activity to lock down the dioxin in the Danang Airport and minimize human risk of exposure at the site. In the November 2006 Joint Statement of President George W. Bush and President Nguyen Minh Triet, the leaders agreed that further joint efforts to address the environmental contamination near former dioxin storage sites would make a valuable contribution to the continued development of their bilateral relationship. In the 2007 supplemental budget, Congress allocated an additional USD 3 million for dioxin remediation activities in Vietnam. The GVN claims to have spent VND 5 billion (USD 312,000) on cleanup efforts in Bien Hoa and Danang. According to Dr. Le Ke Son of MONRE's Office 33 and Dr. Tran Ngoc Tam of the MOD's Science, Technology and Environment Department, the GVN is set to begin a three-month project to prepare a holding area and reinforce the walls of a drainage ditch located between the former dioxin storage areas and Sen lake, located downstream and close to the contaminated area.

**¶13. (U)** Members of the media were not present during the site visit; however, the Agent Orange/dioxin issue was raised during all of the Ambassador's interactions with the press. The Ambassador encouraged members of the media to do more to educate their audience on the need to cease harvesting water plants from the area and to avoid fishing in Sen Lake.

#### Repatriation of Remains Ceremony

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**¶14. (U)** On July 25, the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons (VNOSMP) transferred custody of three sets of remains believed to be those of Americans who died in the Vietnam conflict to Detachment Two, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC). The remains were recovered from Quang Tri and Thua Thien-Hue provinces in central Vietnam and from Lang Son Province in the north. Ambassador Marine presided over the repatriation ceremony at which a military honor guard transferred the remains to a U.S. Air Force aircraft for repatriation to the JPAC Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. The JPAC/CIL is the executive agent of the United States Department of Defense for identifying the remains of all servicemen and servicewomen.

#### Ambassador's Visit Receives Wide Press Coverage

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**¶15. (U)** During his final press roundtable in Danang on July 25, the Ambassador took the opportunity to respond to questions on bilateral relations, including Agent Orange/dioxin, HIV/AIDS, educational collaborations, and joint military cooperation. The roundtable was broadcast not only by Danang television but also by VTV, and resulted in broad print coverage by Danang provincial newspapers and VietnamNet.

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**¶16. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.**  
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